Letter from Taizé

Living the Council of Youth

November 1974

One question marked the first conciliar meeting, held at Taizé from September 6-10 : How, with the whole People of God, can we become a *"People of the Beatitudes"* ? Here you will find answers given, amongst many others, by somebody from Asia, by an African and a South American (p. 2-4).

Wherever we live, the real question for the coming period is going to be that of the forms of committed living which correspond to our precise situations (p. 13-15).

In the *"Letter to the People of God"* which was read at the opening of the Council of Youth and published in the last *Letter from Taizé,* you find these words : *"If we are actively involved in this, we know that we cannot demand anything exacting of others unless we ourselves stake everything."* But how to start ? Just where am I being asked to put down deep roots in life ? How am I going to shape my life in a communion with Christ who is love ? These are themes of the other letter from the opening of the Council of Youth, the letter from Brother Roger, *"Living beyond every hope"* (p. 5-12).

The next celebration of the Council of Youth will take place in Guadalajara, Mexico (p. 16).

ANTICIPATIONS OF "A PEOPLE OF THE BEATITUDES"

Asia

The life of the People of God in my country is both terrible and fine. We have failed greatly in really responding to the conditions and needs of the oppressed and suffering majority of our countrymen. On the other hand, a new breed of christians is being born and now heralding a new consciousness, a minority is becoming a leaven because a growing group of young christians is now waking up, composed by the younger generation of priests and nuns and mainly by young people.

The other day, the soldiers gave a hard blow on the christian sector. They conducted a raid on a seminary and arrested twenty people, including some priests. Why this brutality ? It is for the simple reason that young christians in my country want to incarnate the Gospel by living and walking for more miles with the most oppressed people. Even the Archbishop is raising his voice against this brutal incident. He wrote several letters denouncing the act of the soldiers which were circulated to all the parishes and read the Sunday after the raid. The government threatened him with detention, but the Archbishop asserted his prophetic role for the Gospel and to speak for truth and justice.

Four young people from my group are now volunteering to do a tougher activity, to go into the countryside and work with the exploited workers in the plantations.

During the opening of the Council of Youth, when the Letter to the People of God was being read, I recognized in it the burning commitment of my young fellow-countrymen.

Our Church here is still often not very up-to-date with hings. For instance, fighting poverty means doing charity vith funds coming from Europe. But even if her voice is ot clear, we can see signs of new things.

One priest is living in a shanty-town with a group f about thirty poverty-stricken youngsters. They share ll they have, and are trying to find solutions for their uture without despising even the lowest forms of work.

In one big village, the christians felt the call to share he Word of God together. So each week, local groups of xchange and sharing meet, and there all the christians xplain the Word of God to one another.

The younger ones also wanted to find new ways of ving some really intense moments together, concerning ur faith as well as the necessity of commitments for other eople. So although young people are very disillusioned nd live by superficial values, there sprang up the idea of pilgrimage of young people which they would organize n their own, ignoring the barriers between different ovements and confessions, including students and those vithout work. On the evening of the first day, we wanted o celebrate our hopefulness by a great march to the sea. nd you had two hundred and fifty young people, who vould not have seemed very likely to pray, advancing in ecollection to the brow of the cliff surrounded by night's lence, listening to Christ.

What we experienced during those two days showed s what the Church could be : a People of brothers and sters together, where the questions of each matter to the est, rooted in prayer as the discovery of Christ's presence o be shared with everyone.

In our region, almost everyone works on the land
Living-conditions are harsh and the working-method
primitive. The land does not belong to those working it
The sale of crops is at the mercy of middle-men. Even
nature seems to be hostile : for three years, drought ; now
this year, floods. All the young men are snapped up by
the great industrial centers of the South as cheap labour
The girls go into domestic service and end up as prostitutes

Our Church is part of this picture. We have deliberately
ely chosen to give the priority to the poorest, without
excluding anybody. The poorest : the land-workers with
their wife and ten or fifteen children ; young people with
no work and no means to study, condemned to stagnation
or emigration ; all the victims of prostitution.

What can we do ? There are almost no priests. So we
have had to undertake new forms of ministry together
About eight hundred people take in hand all the animation
of faith, of hope, of the struggle for justice, of organizing
and conscientizing the peasant classes. Almost all of these
leaders are illiterate or semi-illiterate. Their life is the
same as everyone's, they have the same language. The
conditions we work in could not be more precarious, with-
out any funds, without means of communication, without
any specialists to be able to consult.

And I have the joy of being able to report : among
the peasants of my region, I have seen the footsteps of
Christ. I take for myself something said by Dom Helder
Camara, *"When the people found itself oppressed, God
said : Enough. And he came to help them. I hear the foot-
steps of God drawing near."* Because it is to the humble
the people with no voice and no chances, who are not
treated as human beings, that God has entrusted the
secret which sets the world free.

LIVING BEYOND EVERY HOPE

(A letter from Brother Roger)

I have written this letter for you, since you so long to shape your whole life in communion with Christ who is love. One provisional form will make way for another provisional form much more freely when you come to rely, for your entire life-time, on a small number of essential values — a few simple realities.

Opening of the Council of Youth

Taizé, August 30 1974

With the whole people of God together, with peoples of the entire world, you are invited to live more than you could hope for. On your own, how can you experience God's outreaching ?

Too dazzling to be looked on, God is a God who blinds our sight. But Christ restrains the consuming fire and lets God appear, devoid of splendour.

To each person, Christ is present, whether he be recognized or not. He is so bound up with mankind that he dwells in each one, even when he remains unknown. He is there in secret, burning each heart, light in the darkness.

Yet Christ is also somebody other than yourself. Alive he stands outside of you, beyond you, ahead.

This is his secret : he loved you first.

This is the sense of your life : to be loved for ever, loved into eternity, so that you in turn can go so far as to die of love. Without love, what is the point of living ?

From now on nothing, in prayer or in struggle, is really grave except the loss of love. If there is no love, what is the point of believing, or of giving one's body to the flames ?

Do you sense this ? Struggles and contemplation have a single, common source : Christ who is love.

If you pray, it is by love. If you struggle to restore human dignity to those exploited, that too is by love.

Will you let this way become yours ? At the risk of loosing your life through love, will you live Christ for others ?

With the people of the whole world

In order to give a voice to those deprived of any say in life, or to strive for a society without classes, what can one person do on his own ?

With the whole people of God, collectively, it is possible to kindle a fire on the earth.

There is one question of Christ which grips us : when the poorest of all were hungry, did you recognize me in them ? Where were you while I shared the life of those most deprived ? Were you the oppressor, even of just one human being ? Whilst I said "Woe to the rich" — those rich in money, or rich in dogmatic certainty, — have you chosen to run after the mirages of wealth ?

Your struggle cannot be lived out in ideas which fly from pillar to post but never become reality.

Smash the oppressions weighing on the poor and exploited : then, to your surprise, you will see signs of resurrection come springing into life, here and now.

Share whatever you have, with a view to greater justice. Make nobody your victim. As a brother for all, universal in heart, hasten towards whoever is despised or rejected.

"Love those that hate you, pray for those who hurt you." In hatred, what can you transmit of Christ? "Love your neighbour as much as your own self." If you detest yourself, what destruction that will cause in you!

Whereas in fulness, you strive to comprehend everything in every other person.

The closer you come to a communion, the more efforts the tempter will make. In order to be free of the adversary, sing Christ until joy is serene.

Tensions can be creative. But whenever the relationship with others looses its quality through the teeming of inner contradictions or the impossibilities of communication, do not forget that beyond the present barrenness something else lies waiting.

We all judge others according to ourselves, our own heart. So remember only the best of all that you discover in other people. Words of liberation on your lips, and not with a mouth full of condemnation, do not exhaust yourself by looking all the time at the straw in your brother's eye.

If you are judged wrongly on account of Christ, then dance and forgive as God has forgiven. You will discover that you are free beyond compare.

In any dispute, what is the use of trying to find who was wrong and who was right?

Flee clever calculations, strive for a heart which is clear, never manipulate another's conscience, by using his anxiety as a lever to bring him into your own plan of things.

In every domain, creativity is contradicted by easiness of means. Poverty of means brings intense life, with the cheerfulness of present possibilities. Joy evaporates if poverty of means leads to stark austerity or a spirit of self-righteousness.

Poverty of means begets a sense of the universal... And the festival returns over and over again. The festival never ceases.

If festival should ever vanish from mankind... If we were to wake up, one fine day, in a society replete but void of all spontaneity... If praying became so secularized that every trace of the sense of mystery were banished, leaving no place for prayer with the body, for poetry, affection or intuitions... If we came to loose childlike trust in the eucharist and the word of God... If during days of greyness we set out to destroy the things grasped during times of light... If we inclined to say No to a happiness offered by the One who eight times declares "Happy..." (Matthew 5).

If festival disappears from the body of Christ, if the Church is a place of narrowness and not of universal comprehension, where in all the world shall we find a place of friendship for the whole of mankind ?

Only in God's presence are we ourselves

When you pray, if you are unable to feel any echo of God's presence in you, why worry ? There is such a vague dividing-line between emptiness and fulness, or between doubt and belief, between fear and love.

The essential is always concealed from your own eyes. But that stimulates even more the ardent seeking after ways of advancing towards the only reality. Then, gradually, it becomes possible to sense something of the depth and breadth of a love beyond all knowledge. There you touch the gates of contemplation. There you draw the energy needed for new beginnings, for daring commitment.

Discovering who you are with nobody there to understand you can provoke a sense of shame so strong that it leads to self-destruction. At times, it can bring you to feel as though you are living under sentence. Yet for the Gospel there is no normality or abnormality, only persons in the image of God. Then who could condemn? Jesus prays in you. He offers the liberation of forgiveness to all who live in poverty of heart, so that they become, in turn, liberators of others.

Within each individual there exists a realm of solitude which no human relationship can fill, not even the deepest love between two people. Whoever does not consent to this place of solitude comes to revolt against others, and against God himself.

Yet you are never alone. Allow yourself to be sounded to the very heart, and you will see that every person is created for a presence. There, in the utmost recess of your being, at the point where no two people are alike, Christ waits. And the unexpected happens.

Dazzling passing of the love of God, the Holy Spirit flames through each life in its night. As he passes, the risen Christ lays hold of you, takes charge of everything, he himself bears all that is unbearable.

Only later, sometimes very much later, you realize : Christ passed by, Christ gave his superabundance.

At the moment when your eyes open to this fact, you will exclaim, "Surely, my heart was ablaze within me, as he spoke ?"

Christ does not abolish flesh and blood. In a communion with him there is no place for alienations. He does not break what lies in man. He came, not to abolish but to fulfil. So as you listen, in the silence of your heart, he transfigures the most disturbing within you. When you are wrapped round with what is incomprehensible, when the night grows more opaque, his love is fire. Then you need only fix your eyes on that lamp burning in the darkness, until dawn begins to break and the day rises in your heart.

Happy whoever dies of love

Never a pause, O Christ, in your persistent question, "Who do you say that I am ?"

You are he who loves me into life unending.

You open ways of daring. You go before me along the way of holiness, where happy are they who die of love, where the final response is martyrdom.

The "No" within me you take and daily transfigure into "Yes". What you ask of me is not a few scraps but the whole of my existence.

By day and by night, you pray in me without my knowing how. My stutterings are prayer : simply calling you by your name of Jesus makes full our communion.

Each morning anew, you slip onto my finger the ring of the prodigal son recovered, the ring of festival.

So why have I hesitated so long ? Have I "exchanged the glory of God for what can do nothing ? Have I left aside the spring of living waters to build myself cracked cisterns incapable of holding water ?" (Jeremiah).

Tirelessly you have sought me. Why did I hesitate yet again, asking for time to deal with my own affairs ? Once I had set my hand to the plough, why this looking back ? Not too aware of it, I was making myself unfit to follow you.

Yet, never having seen you, I loved you.

Always you urged : live the little part of the Gospel that you have already grasped. Proclaim my life. Kindle fire on the earth... You, follow me...

Until one day I understood : you were asking me to commit my life to the point of no return.

Roger, your Brother

Sharing with people at large

"Commitment to the point of no return ; living Christ for others." There are any number of ways of supporting one another in our mutual searching for such commitment : letters that we write, visits exchanged, prayer in common... But since we have decided never to try to form "Council of Youth" groups as a separate thing, this invites us not just to stay together as friends with a few people, but to share boldly with a quite different generation, or cultural group or social context. The "interior adventure" was a major feature of the preparation period of the Council of Youth, and it continues : it represents something quite central and irreplaceable. But from there, comes the need to really live something. This is Michel's question :

"I am afraid that some of us are inclined to settle down in the purely-informal, or in 'cocoon-communities', in exactly the same way as other people settle down in affluence, or in their job of work. It seems to me that the underground adventure, the spontaneous leaps forward in different directions often parallel to what others were already living in organised structures, corresponded to a real need, to a way of searching, but they were a stage : the aim of it all was to stimulate initiatives and intuitions, and to uncover the pillars of believing. The direction was inwards, an invisible and silent moving ahead, because ready-made answers and institutions no longer seemed related to our experiences. But surely it would be dangerous to prolong this stage, always forbidding ourselves to go and join in those points where something can be changed ? Points such as existing structures, institutions, groupings of a formal kind. And that may even involve accepting things that we cannot wholly agree with — getting our hands dirty.

If each one's personal experience does not find its place in these points (parties, trade unions, movements, Church organisations...) how shall we be able to enter into contact with people in general ?"

How to find our own personal directions of commitment ? We are obliged to think about the way we actually live, as well as analyse the reality in which our lives are set in order to see it in a larger whole. This is something that John has discovered through his journeys to Mexico :

"Many young people in the United States react strongly against what they call 'intellectualizing'. They are not interested in theories about life. We are finally learning how to move from abstract discussions to concrete examples, to sharing the real questions that arise in our day-to-day living.

After a visit to Latin America, however, I began to wonder if perhaps we were not in danger of going too far in the opposite direction. The young people there see the situation a bit differently. For them it is clear that both poles are needed : a serious commitment on a local level, but also a wider analysis to understand the relationship of what we are living to the rest of the world ; at the same time life, and reflection on life.

But we are not used to serious analysis. North Americans like to eat meat. But do we realize that to feed the cattle to give us our beef, American companies import large quantities of high-protein food from the poorer countries, food which could be used to feed their starving people ? Sitting at the dinner table you are thus part of an international structure of exploitation. Until we start making these connections, it seems to me we cannot talk seriously about communion with the oppressed."

Directions to explore

The two letters from the opening of the Council of Youth, the *"Letter o the People of God"* and *"Living beyond every hope"* suggest any number of directions to be explored. What follows is a kind of rapid summary of certain preoccupations in the meetings at Taizé at the present time. Perhaps it can help see more clearly how "being committed" is more than a matter of "spare-time activities" :

MOVING FORWARD IN A DEEPENING LOVE FOR CHRIST

How to base our whole existence on the contemplation of Christ ? How do we let him change the way we see others, situations ?

What are the fundamental sources of the faith we are living by, and how to renew our familiarity with them ?

The Resurrection as a festival where conflict and confrontation are not run away from.

How to put into actual practice, be it in struggle or worship, those features of the Gospel which really mean something for us personally ?

DISCOVERING THE COMMUNION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

How to live like the very first christians, who shared everything, and gathered daily to praise God in prayer ?

How to anticipate a "people of the Beatitudes" ?

The search as a community to be renewed day after day in the joy of forgiveness and eucharist ?

How to build up the communion of the Church when people are living different forms of social and political involvement ?

Life as a couple, or in life-long celibacy : two commitments without return.

With those who do not believe, how to search together and find a common energy for our commitments towards others in society ?

BEING LEAVEN OF A SOCIETY WITHOUT CLASS, WHERE NONE HAVE PRIVILEGES

What does it mean in my situation to struggle, devoid of all power, with those persecuted, neglected, diminished ; how am I situated as regards the people oppressed and crushed because of our over-affluent life-styles ; what about the defenseless, the weak, the lonely people around ?

Giving up privileges... Creating signs of resurrection.

How to have real sharing between young people and adults, between parents and their children, between pupils and teachers, between the young and the very old... ?

How to be actively involved in bringing people to new attitudes, so that socialization can become a reality ?

COMING CELEBRATIONS OF THE COUNCIL OF YOUTH

The opening of the Council of Youth will unfold acros the different continents in a number of successive celebra tions.

After the opening at Taizé, the next celebration of th Council of Youth will take place December 28-31 a Guadalajara in Mexico. This will make it possible fo North Americans as well as Latin Americans to take par offering a sign of solidarity between the youth of th Northern and Southern worlds.

The celebration will be held in Santa Cecilia, the pa of the city where those live who have newly come in o the land, mostly illiterate. Lack of work, poverty, litt hygiene are daily realities. And neighborhood-groups hav sprung up here — christian grass-roots communities o men, women, couples or young people who together try t analyse their problems and how to solve them. Each of th groups meets once a week to pray, and to reflect togethe on the problems of life in the light of the Gospel. Some o the groups have community of goods, too.

All those taking part in this celebration will be accom modated by families belonging to these grass-roots com munities.

Other celebrations are in preparation in various Soutl American countries, and then in the United States an Quebec. The places and dates will soon be announced.

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